

NOTES ON SOME INDIAN BIRDS.

BY

E. H. N. LOWTHER, M.B.O.U., F.Z.S.

(With 6 plates).

III.—BIRDS IN MY GARDEN.

(Continued from page 560 of Volume xxxix).

By 'my garden' I mean the gardens of the different bungalows I have occupied during a service of over a quarter of a century spent with the East Indian Railway, in the exigencies of which I have from time to time been posted in different parts of Bengal, Bihar and the United Provinces.

Looking through my notes I find myself confronted with such an *embarras de richesse* that I hardly know where to start. I see that I have come across the nests of forty-five different species in the gardens of bungalows in which I have lived. Twenty-two of the number were found in one garden alone, in the Agra district. Over and above this, I have discovered the nests of nine additional species in my friends' gardens, including that of a Grey Hornbill, which found a nesting tree in Hume's old compound at Etawah.

SUNBIRDS.

Much has been written lately concerning the manner in which the Purple Sunbird builds its nest—I ought perhaps to have said *her* nest because the male takes no part in this task. Nevertheless what I have observed may not be without interest. On 5 April 1922, while seated in a 'long-sleever' enjoying my *palan que char*, I noticed a female Sunbird flying from one bush to another, obviously prospecting for a nesting site. The choice eventually fell upon a slender twig of a small lime tree. As soon as this important question had been decided, the little bird busied herself with fetching materials for the home that was to hold her eggs. She had not far to go. Cobwebs, small pieces of bark or decayed wood, carpenters' shavings, bits of torn-up paper, cotton, cocoons, miscellaneous rubbish—are they not all to be found somewhere in every compound? However, even allowing for the fact that the materials were close at hand, I was surprised, the following morning, when I timed her in her building operations. Forty visits in forty and a half minutes, and fifty in sixty and a half minutes! Consider what this means—searching for the material, flying with it to the nest, incorporating it in the structure and then flying away to bring more, and it will be realised she allowed herself no respite. At 8-15, the Sunbird showed signs of feeling the effects of her labours and the visits to the nest then slowed down

appreciably. Possibly this was due to a shortage of materials; more probably it was because of the heat; at all events, from mid-day till 2-30 she did not go near the nest. I imagine, like every other sensible person, up-country, she felt she needed a rest in the afternoon. Nevertheless, when I returned from office that evening, the pendent home was roughly fashioned, even down to the entrance hole. This nest held the first egg on 11 April, so that only six days were spent in its construction. Altogether three eggs were laid—a somewhat unusual clutch, two being the normal number. The eggs are a dirty-white in ground colour, with greyish-brown spots. A peculiarity about this species is that it frequently rears two broods in the same nest. I have a note also of it laying three lots of eggs in a nest I had under observation in my garden at Allahabad. Each clutch was destroyed, possibly by a Crow-Pheasant or blood-sucker lizard, though the nest was not damaged in any way until the third clutch was ravished.

Only once did I see the husband of the busy female, whose industry I have just related,—at least I presume he was her lawfully wedded spouse—go anywhere near the nest while it was being built. He perched on a neighbouring lime tree, rattled off a few canary-like notes, gave his wife the 'once over' and then, when she flew off to fetch more materials, pursued another of the opposite sex! Not only does the male Purple Sunbird not assist in building the nest but I have never seen him incubate. When, however, the eggs have hatched, he takes a more active interest in family affairs and is to be seen frequently feeding the young although even in this respect he is never so assiduous as the female.

WOOD-SHRIKES.

I have never been able to understand how it was that Hume succeeded only once in finding the nest of the Common Indian Wood-Shrike. In those parts of the United Provinces with which I am familiar, which were its happy huting grounds too, it is a common species, frequenting *mango* and *seesum* groves as well as orchards and gardens. Perhaps it is because of its dull grey plumage that the bird so commonly escapes notice; nevertheless its note is a peculiar whistle which never fails to attract attention. The nest, if searched for in the ordinary way, is difficult to locate, though the reverse is the case if, in March and April, the birds are patiently watched. Like the White-browed Fantail Flycatcher and the Small Minivet, they are indefatigable workers, and during these months it is a simple matter with a good pair of field-glasses to watch either sex carrying materials to the nest under construction. Moreover the species is intolerant of the presence of other birds or small animals too close to its home. It was due to this little failing that I found my first Wood-Shrike's nest, built high up in a *seesum* tree. Since then I have on several occasions found the nest of this species in my garden, usually wedged into the horizontal fork of a *nim* tree, only, however, in the western districts of the United Provinces.

I know of no prettier sight than a Wood-Shrike building its nest. Both sexes engage in the task, and frequently, while one



A COMMON WOOD SHRIKE FEEDING ITS YOUNG.

bird is at the nest the other arrives with more material. The latter will not, however, 'do anything about it' until the first arrival has taken its departure. About the third or fourth day, the future nursery assumes something approaching its final shape. Then it is that the Wood-Shrike is frequently seen *in* the nest, applying cobwebs to the exterior, smoothing things down with its beak, which is used like a trowel, first working to the right and then to the left, and finally giving strength to the whole structure by pressing the sides inwards with its chin, all the while turning round and round in the nest. Ordinarily, three eggs are laid. Out of about 40 nests that I have examined, only once have I known this number exceeded, and then the nest contained a newly-hatched chick and three eggs. In the case of a nest built in my garden, incubation lasted fourteen days from the laying of the last egg. Both sexes take part in this task and sit closely. When the eggs are hatching, Wood-Shrikes seem to have no thought for matters mundane; their whole attention is concentrated on the little bodies that are coming into the world. On such an occasion, I once photographed at close range, and without using the hiding tent, a pair of these birds at their nest. So extraordinarily confiding was the female that, incredible though it may sound, she not only twice allowed me to lift her off her nest and put her back again, but even permitted me to place a finger between her open mandibles. While all this took place the male remained perched on the nest-bough only a few inches beyond the nest.

NUTHATCHES.

The Chestnut-bellied Nuthatch is a common visitor to those gardens where old *mango* and *siris* trees occur, and the sight of the bird, as it runs up or down or even sideways along the trunk of some gnarled giant, almost invariably leads the novice to believe he has spotted a really uncommon species. With the Tree Creeper he is usually familiar, but the slaty-blue upper plumage of the Nuthatch is to him an unknown quantity and therefore the bird is at once put down as 'rare'. Although it is so generally distributed, I confess to having found a Nuthatch's nest only once in a friend's garden and to having seen but three nests of *Sitta c. castanea* during twenty-seven years. I attribute my failure to the fact that the bird is a very early nester—nesting operations commence in February or the beginning of March at the latest—and my attention at this time of the year is usually directed to the different birds of prey. The nest may be low down, or high up, in a tree. A natural hole serves for the nursery but the hole is plastered up with mud and clay till the entrance is only about $1\frac{1}{4}$ inches in diameter—just large enough to admit the owners. The ease with which a Nuthatch enters and leaves the nest-hole is amazing. To me the bird always appears to be unusually broad-shouldered but it literally 'packs' itself up, and lo! we have *multum in parvo*!

The 30th of March 1938 opened in a most disappointing manner for me. I had gone to Etawah hoping to photograph a Common Quail on its nest. On arrival there, I found that my *zamindar* friend had been wrong in his identification. The bird whose nest

he had found was the Jungle Bush-Quail, which I had previously photographed, and with the cutting of the *arhar* crop (in which the nest was situated) the eggs had been deserted. It was while breakfasting in my saloon, musing over my bad luck that I noticed a Chestnut-bellied Nuthatch working a *nim* tree and even descending to the ground in search of food. When the bird flew away and shortly returned, my curiosity was really roused. Following the Nuthatch on its departure again, with the glasses, I quickly found the nest-hole, which unfortunately, though quite invisible from the ground, was high up in a *nim* and overlooked the local gaol. However, thanks to the influence of friends, the municipal authorities allowed a *machan* to be erected in the road and on 7th April I was able to photograph the Nuthatch at home. The male is by far the handsomer of the two, and in addition was much bolder in facing the camera—in fact it did not worry him at all, even though not concealed in any way, a remark which also applies to myself, seated comfortably just behind the tripod. In spite, however, of being so fearless of camera and man, the obtaining of a successful photograph of the Nuthatch is no easy matter owing to its very rapid movements. Its industry is such as to give one the impression that the bird has awakened an hour late and is now doing its utmost to make up the time lost.

When first I found it, a pair of Common Mynahs paid repeated visits to the Chestnut-bellied Nuthatch's nest, frequently dropping a *nim* leaf into the hole, and on 7th April, when I was on the *machan*, the nest was from time to time visited by a Yellow-throated Sparrow, whose portrait I also secured. Such visits by other species to nests in holes of trees are not uncommon; the visitors often subsequently take possession of the hole for their own nesting purposes.

MYNAHS.

Three species of Mynah have honoured me by nesting in my garden, two of them, the Common and Pied Mynahs, frequently, and the third, the Brahminy Mynah, occasionally. In Northern India the last named nests only in holes in trees. The Common Mynah nests as often in a hole in a tree as in one in a building. More than once, however, I have come across a nest resting on the top of a pillar in the verandah. The nest of the Pied Mynah is constructed quite differently. It is a large, domed, irregular mass of long straws, roots, rags and twigs placed in the outer branches of some tree,—pieces of straw and grass frequently hanging down in the most untidy manner. Sometimes, several such nests may be found in the same tree. The interior is heavily lined with feathers, but the entrance to the egg cavity is by no means easy to find. Both Common and Pied Mynahs' nests seem to be particularly susceptible to raids by snakes. I well remember watching a cobra try to climb a *simal* tree in a hole of which a pair of Common Mynahs had a nest containing young ones. I think the snake would have succeeded in attaining its object had not the parent birds, and others of their kind, flung themselves repeatedly at the cobra as it tried again and again to negotiate



THE CHESTNUT-BELLIED
NUTHATCH.

A natural hole in a tree served for her nursery. The bird plasters the entrance with mud and clay leaving a narrow opening.



The Nuthatch's nest was visited from time to time by a Yellow-throated Sparrow.

the *simal's* ample girth. On another occasion, my lunch was interrupted by the chattering calls of innumerable Pied and Common Mynahs; a number of House Crows were also making use of unpleasant language: again it was a cobra; but this time it had disposed of two baby Pied Mynahs, and as it rested by the nest, it was in turn disposed of by me.

I am reminded of three incidents as I write of the Brahminy Mynah. The first two relate to a time when I was photographing this species at the same nest. The nest in question was built in a hole of a *seesum* tree growing on the bank of a canal close to the railway line. Running parallel with and immediately adjacent to the track was a path much used by the local residents. A goods train passed, and as it did so, I noticed the second fireman take a large piece of coal and throw it deliberately at a woman who was walking along the path with an infant in her arms, missing her narrowly. Even now, twenty years later, my blood boils as I think of the dastardly act and of the approving smiles this beast won as he turned to his mates on the footplate. Fortunately I had seen everything clearly and noted the time, so that in due course the Locomotive Superintendent was able to deal faithfully with the entire engine crew who, it is almost unnecessary to add, resolutely denied the charge brought against them.

The other incident relating to the nest mentioned in the preceding paragraph was as amusing as the last was disgusting. I was not using a hiding tent, but had positioned the camera near the nest and decided I would conceal myself behind a bush and operate the shutter with a piece of string attached to it. I therefore passed the string through a hole bored in a stake placed immediately under the shutter, and led it along to the spot from where I was going to pull it when the occasion arose. The top of the stake was only two inches above the ground and, while not in use, the string lay loose. A squirrel noticed this string and thinking it would make her nest cosy started collecting it in its mouth, invariably pulling the loose end in until I gave this a jerk and frightened it away. On one occasion, however, she reversed the usual order of things before I realised what was happening and so released the shutter, thereby obtaining what I imagine must be the first photograph taken by an animal of a bird's nesting site.

The third incident led me to think seriously of how young birds first leave their nests when these are built in holes in trees, etc. At the back of my mind existed an impression that the parents *drove them from the nest*. Where I got this idea from I cannot think. At the particular nest I am thinking of, the young were well feathered and it was clearly a question of hours only before they made their first public appearance. I had not long to wait. After I had photographed one of the adults at the nest neither parent would venture to feed the young again; instead, they remained on the branch of an opposite *nim* tree, with food in their beaks, uttering different notes and obviously cajoling the young to make the initial flight. When this had continued for half an hour or more, one young one, more venturesome than the rest—possibly it was the eldest too—appeared at the entrance of the hole and

then popped back into the nest. After repeating this performance three or four times, it eventually decided to take the plunge and succeeded in reaching its parents although not without effort and not without anxiety on the latter's part, as was clear from the manner in which by their excited calls they encouraged the bold spirit to do its utmost. The young bird was then given double rations and was subsequently led away to a more leafy part of the tree with a view probably to escaping the notice of such enemies as the Shikra. I have since come to the conclusion that birds that lay their eggs in holes of trees regularly resort to such an expedient when the time has come for the young to leave the home. I have watched the same thing happen with a Northern Grey Hornbill and Crested Black Tits.

BARBETS AND WOODPECKERS.

Barbets and Woodpeckers are closely related; it will, therefore, not be inopportune to class them together for our present purpose. In many parts of the United Provinces one may confidently expect to come across the nests of the Green Barbet and the smaller Crimson-breasted Barbet in the same garden especially if *mango*, *gold mohur*, or cork trees are to be found therein. The prevailing colour in both species is green. The Crimson-breasted Barbet has some yellow, red and black about the head, near the eyes, about the chin and breast, yet so closely do these birds assimilate with the foliage of the trees in which they spend their lives that it is most difficult to see them, even though, from the *direction* of the calls, one obtains a fairly good idea of their whereabouts. I say *fairly good* advisedly, because their notes are somewhat ventriloquial in character owing to the manner in which these birds turn from side to side when calling. Their notes are amongst the best known bird sounds in India. 'Tonk-tonk-tonk', says the Crimson-breasted Barbet, while the Green Barbet cries 'Kurr-r-r-r', 'kooturuck-kooturuck-kooturuck', till one is tired of hearing their notes.

As one would expect from their close relationship to the Woodpeckers, Barbets cut out a hole in a tree, either in the trunk, or more usually in one of the branches, wherein to deposit their eggs, the Crimson-breasted Barbet or Coppersmith frequently on the under-side of a more or less horizontal bough. Like woodpeckers' eggs, those of barbets are pure white in colour, but are very fragile and easily damaged, if one attempts to cut out a hole to obtain them. Barbets live principally on different fruits and are specially partial to the small berries of the *pipal* tree. They vary the diet somewhat when feeding the young. I have observed both species take the white- and black-winged flying ants into the nest-hole; and although one would never suspect the Green Barbet of being particularly active I have watched one catch a small dragon fly.

Very little has, I think, been recorded of the manner in which such birds as barbets and woodpeckers retire for the night. A pair of Coppersmiths I had under observation for some time in Cawnpore interested me greatly. Both parents fed the young until it was almost too dark to see, and then one of the birds always



A GREEN BARBET LOOKS OUT FROM ITS NEST HOLE.

retired to the nest-hole, while the other found shelter for the night in a neighbouring tree, in an old digging. Although I have not watched a Green Barbet retire for the night, it would seem that this species follows a somewhat similar procedure. I have noticed one come out of a hole before feeding operations could possibly have commenced for the day.

The only woodpecker, which I am *certain* had gone to rest for the night, clung to the under surface of a branch standing about 40° out of the horizontal. I watched this particular bird—a Golden-backed Woodpecker—take up this position on a *nim* tree just as it was growing dark, and it was still in this position when I investigated matters again shortly before 11 p.m. Another Golden-backed Woodpecker, which I *thought* had retired for the night, rested on the perpendicular surface of a palm tree. The bird remained in this position for about fifteen minutes, and it was then almost impossible to see, but something alarmed it and away it flew.

Two or three writers have stated that the food which woodpeckers take to their young is not visible in their beaks. This is contrary to my experience. I have photographed three different species of woodpeckers in India, the Kashmir Pied Woodpecker, the Mahratta Pied Woodpecker—at two nests—and the Black-backed Woodpecker, and in each instance the food for the young was often plainly visible as the parents arrived at the tree. Several of my photographs show this, though few are worthy of publication as owing to their rapid, jerky movements the genus has almost invariably defeated the shutter for speed.

KITES.

As a child I bore the Common Kite bitter hatred. I still have vivid recollections of how more than once, while seated out in the open in the early morning, breakfasting on buttered toast, one of these birds bore down on me from behind and snatched from my fingers the morsel I was on the point of eating. Occasionally I received scratches sufficient to draw blood; then it was that I retired, worsted, to receive poor consolation when I arrived indoors, my parents telling me I deserved all that had come my way. That, however, was more than forty years ago. Today I do not object to the Kite taking up its abode on my premises, the small chickens that it carries off being not mine but the cook's property. Often has that worthy asked me to shoot the *shaitans*, but I decline to interfere as it always gives me pleasure to see the birds about. Besides, if I did shoot the Kites, the price I would be charged for the chickens would be no less than I am asked today, so *cui bono?*

Like every other onlooker, I cannot help smiling when I see a Kite swoop down on some vendor's tray at a railway station, or snatch from some fat hand the tasty-looking sweets, freshly purchased, which are being conveyed back to a compartment in the open palm held on a level with the shoulders, that all may know how well-to-do is the purchaser. Which indicates (I am told) that I have a distorted sense of humour, while I argue—'from him that hath it shall be taken away.'

Almost invariably the Kite builds its nest near Man's habitation. It has a foundation of substantial twigs placed in the fork of some tree; wool, dirty old rags, cotton waste and similar material being used as a lining. I have seen stones and pieces of *kanher* worked in between the twigs and once came across a child's bow and arrow incorporated in a nest. On another occasion the three eggs in a nest in my compound rested on a hare's skin which the cook had carelessly thrown out near the kitchen. Usually two eggs are laid although three are not uncommon. These are greyish white in ground colour, sparingly blotched with brown and red. The long-drawn-out call of the Kite, *chee-eel*, from which the bird derives its common Indian name, is one of the familiar if unpleasant sounds of bazaar or cantonment.

DOVES.

It seems strange at first sight that the behaviour of the same species should vary greatly in different parts of the country. Throughout the United Provinces, and elsewhere as well, I have found the Little Brown Dove and the Indian Ring Dove very tame, so much so that I neglected to photograph them when the opportunities were legion. In the Manbhūm district in Bihar, however, both species are extremely shy. There is a good reason for this, everybody, both young and old, being bent on their destruction. Many a time in this and the neighbouring districts have I come across the most ingeniously constructed snares at the nest, added to which numbers are killed by means of bows and arrows. Elsewhere both species nest in gardens—the Little Brown Dove either in some bush, or on some ledge in the verandah itself. On one occasion I came across a nest of this species containing the usual two eggs at the foot of a bush, on the ground, on a high railway embankment. I do not remember having seen a Ring Dove's nest within the precincts of a bungalow. The bird instead builds its sketchy home regularly in some bush. I have found the nest of only one other species of dove in a garden: this belonged to a pair of Spotted Doves and was built on a verandah ledge.

The Little Brown Dove, whose photograph is shown herewith, had its nest in a thick prickly bush on a hill side covered with scrub-jungle. The nest was situated about three feet from the ground and, when I first attempted photography, contained two young ones about ten days old. The *hide* had been in position for two days and, although the parent birds were reported to be accustomed to it, hours passed before they returned to the platform of twigs. In the meanwhile much of interest was taking place at the nest itself and *in the hide*, to keep me occupied and even amused. At first both young ones indulged in a great deal of 'shut-eye'; after half an hour the younger squab preened itself, following this up by stretching first one wing and then the other. The elder youngster followed suit and finally both indulged themselves in this manner at the same time. They—especially the elder—also shifted their positions now and again. It was after I had been in the *hide* about an hour that a good deal of rustling began to take place amongst the dead leaves outside the tent. Thoughts of a snake or scorpion



THE LITTLE BROWN DOVE

Both young indulged in much wing flapping, one trying to oust the other to be fed first.

